

Didn't You Love Me?

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Didn't You Love Me?

by [charmedward](#)

Summary

"I'm still dangerous, Steve. I sleepwalk. I could slit your throat with a kitchen knife and go back to bed without realising. Just 'case I'm me now don't mean I'm always gonna be me. You get that, don't you?"

And he should be saying yes. Yes I know you could kill me, could lead all our enemies right to my front door and let them in. Yes I know you aren't that man I went to war with. But Steve doesn't say that. With a glance at Sharon, he sits up straighter and squares his shoulders. It's the look that Sam has taken to calling "Steve's taking on the world's burdens" look.

"We'll make it work, Buck."

AKA that fic where Bucky gets his memories back only to believe he and Steve had been a couple all along.

Notes

Thanks to Tallie for beta-ing the first few chapters!

Updated 3/05/2019 to fix typos, improve the writing, and fix weird characterisation.

Oil and Sweat

Chapter Summary

Updated to fix typos 3/05/2019

It had been nearly a year since Phil Coulson rose from the ashes of the Triskelion Incident and became Director of SHIELD. Under his watchful eye (and with the help of an elite team of agents) SHIELD bases, safe houses, labs and sites had been retaken by storm and purged of the double agents hiding within. More people had been hired to fill the gaps HYDRA had left behind and alliances were formed with other spy networks. It was all coming together.

The only exception to this success was the small problem of the Winter Soldier.

Coulson loathed sending his best soldier out on a year-long search for just one man, but he hadn't had a say in it. Steve Rogers had made it clear from the get go that he would only support the new SHIELD if he was given time to find the Winter Soldier and bring him home. The bluntness of this statement had made Coulson suspect Rogers was still mad at him for lying about his supposed death on the Helicarrier. Regardless, he had watched Rogers and Wilson leave without argument. Coulson understood the all-encompassing need to save a friend.

So when Rogers turns up one evening with the Winter Soldier in tow, the new Director finds himself both happy for the men yet concerned for their future.

*

It's been a month since Steve has arrived in New York; three weeks, six days and five hours to be precise. If he had been given a choice, he would be back in DC. New York still held memories that were painful to withstand: Waking up alone in a new century, the battle against Loki, his youth with Bucky, all of it bombards him as he walks the wet sidewalk of his home. He had gone to DC for a *reason*. Here, everything feels wrong. His old haunts had either been knocked down and replaced with chain stores, or left to rot like fruit in the sun. He hadn't given himself the pain of visiting his old apartment yet (if it was even still there). That would be saved for a particularly masochistic day.

Steve looks at the ground as he walks. It's amazing how few people recognise him when he simply slumps his shoulders and doesn't make eye contact. Natasha had told him that there was an art to hiding in plain sight but he hadn't believed her until recently. Suit or no suit, he was the poster boy of America, a face known to everyone.

Now he walks the streets of New York alone and without purpose, finding himself worked up about the smallest things. At the moment he was angry at the weather for clearing up. Judging by the puddles on the roads he'd missed the rain by minutes. On a day like today, one month from his homecoming, all Steve wants is the sensation of rain beating down on him. Instead he has to settle for slippery manhole covers and a cab driving too close to the sidewalk and sending a typhoon of water up to meet his ankles. Flurries of disgusted noises come from his fellow pedestrians but Steve keeps quiet.

He is just passing a bakery, the smell of pastry tempting in the air, when his SHIELD-issued pager

goes off. Stepping out of the flow of people and into the doorway of an apartment, Steve fumbles for the device clipped to his pants. He stares at it for a long moment. His heart speeds up. Reaching for his phone, Steve steps back into the crowd and is striding down the street before the second ring.

“Coulson,” answers a calm voice on the other end.

“Where is he?” Steve has no time for niceties.

There is a tired sigh on the other end and the sound of shuffling paper. “Barnes is still in his room and he’s going to stay there until you come to retrieve him. There are going to be rules, Captain Rogers. I’m still not sure that it’s a good idea to relea-”

“He’s going stir crazy in that cell, Sir,” Steve interrupts. “I’m on my way; ETA twenty minutes.”

He hangs up and stashes the phone before breaking into a sprint. Three weeks, six days, five hours and *finally* Bucky is ready to come home.

*

23 minutes later Steve is in an elevator hurtling down into the earth’s crust. He’s thinking about how long it’s been since he brought Bucky to this hellhole to be assessed and analysed and prodded at. He’s thinking about how Bucky must resent him now for it now. He’s thinking that he did the only thing he could have.

Despite visiting him every day, only leaving to eat and sleep, Steve has felt like he’d abandoned his best friend to the mercy of SHIELD. He knew they were helping him come to terms with who he was now and helping to break any residual homicidal programming, but he still hated it. Coulson had mentioned one day nearly a week after their arrival that tests showed Bucky’s arm appeared to be attached to his spine and Steve had almost broken a desk when he’d discovered that Bucky was still being treated like a lab rat even now. It had been made clear to him that he and Bucky had no choice, either SHIELD 'helped' him or they'd turn him over to a fearful and vengeance-motivated American government. Whether the threats were hollow or not was something Steve did not intend to find out. Instead he put his foot down to all but the necessary tests.

“We need to understand this prosthetic technology, Captain.” Coulson had said, “Even Stark can’t fathom it without a good look and this is *Tony Stark*. Barnes has a prosthetic that’s light years beyond anything our top guys have ever seen. Think about what this means! If we could understand it we could revolutionise modern medicine. For god’s sake, the man has *feeling* in it.”

Eventually Steve had been worn down and, having discussed it with Bucky, had consented to most of the tests. He made sure that Bucky was aware of what each test was for and every time he had stayed in the room to be by his side. It felt like the least Steve could do.

Recently there had been fewer tests and Steve had become more insistent with his demands to get Bucky out of the building. He had complained about jaundice and the perils of isolation until he was blue in the face and then finally, *finally*, he’s allowed to take him home.

The elevator dings softly and the doors slide open to reveal a dull corridor. The only colour in the corridor is Agent Sharon Carter, blonde hair piled into a neat bun atop her head as she greets Steve and falls into step with him.

“You’re aware of the Director’s rules?”

“He mentioned them but I’ll need the run down.”

Sharon nods and begins to rattle off, "Barnes is to go nowhere unaccompanied and all accompaniment must be SHIELD approved. For now that means you or Wilson. He still needs to meet with his dietician and therapist on a regular basis and any missed therapy appointments will result in him having to come back. He's not allowed weaponry of any kind until otherwise stated but he can continue practising martial arts or self-defence training. What else? Oh, no alcohol but I think that's a rule his dietician set."

They're standing outside Bucky's door now. Steve nods in agreement and looks over to see Sharon staring at him. He suddenly feels at a loss.

"Is the dietician not a bit much?" he says lamely.

Sharon narrows her eyes a bit, probably able to smell a stall for time. She tucks a wisp of hair behind her ear and rocks back on her heels.

"You forget that his meals for the last 70 years have all come from IV fluids. His body needs to be eased back into good habits of every kind. Not to mention that things have changed since you were both on ice, you know that. We live in a world where—"

"There's too much choice," Steve finishes.

Sharon smiles, "I was going to say where our understanding of nutrition has evolved, but that works too."

Nodding, he presses his thumb to the scanner and lets himself into Bucky's room.

The smell hits him first, as it always does. Steve thinks it's an oil of some kind. He's never asked Bucky about his arm, but if he had to guess it either needs oil for lubricating the joints or for cleaning purposes. Either way, the smell of it is heavy in the air. It mixes with the damp whiff of sweat and creates a fragrance Steve has come to associate with his best friend.

Bucky is doing press ups on a yoga mat. He doesn't look up as Steve enters the room and that's fine because Steve is in no rush to interrupt him. Somehow he looks at peace when he's exercising, muscles straining and chest heaving. Like Sharon, his hair is pulled into a bun but his is messy and snug at the back of his head. Steve wonders who gave him the hair tie.

"You're early today. Did you skip lunch with the president to see my work out?"

With a shrug of his shoulders Steve lowers himself onto the bed and watches Bucky's back move through the air.

"Well I thought since we had dinner last week he wouldn't mind me cancelling on account of a special occasion."

Steve hears a chuckle from the door way and is reminded that Sharon is with them. He clasps his hands together and leans forwards.

"You ready to come home, Buck?" his words are gentle but he still sees Bucky freeze for a split second.

"Ain't that where we are now? It's still New York up there, right?" Bucky's tone is measured, controlled.

"I mean with me. Come home with me. Coulson gave the affirmative; we can be there in an hour."

Bucky twists until he's sat with his legs stretched out in front of Steve. He looks at him with guarded blue eyes, searching Steve wordlessly as his breathing evens out. His eyes drift to the open door of his room, it seemingly confirming something to him. Finally, he says, "I'm not magically fixed. You know that right? There's a lot I can't remember and too much that I can." He wets his lips, "I'm still dangerous, Steve. I sleepwalk. I could slit your throat with a kitchen knife and go back to bed without realising. Just 'case I'm me now don't mean I'm always gonna be me. You get that, don't you?"

And Steve should be saying yes. Yes I know you could kill me, could lead all our enemies right to my front door and let them in. Yes I know you aren't that man I went to war with. But Steve doesn't say that. With a glance at Sharon, he sits up straighter and squares his shoulders. It's the look that Sam has taken to calling "Steve's taking on the world's burdens" look.

"I get it, but that won't stop me taking you home. We'll get Stark to install better security systems and Sam will move in too. He's too much of a light sleeper to let you kill him in his sleep. We'll make it work, Buck."

Bucky looks over his shoulder for Sharon's approving nod. It might be Steve's imagination, but Bucky seems to relax a little when she gives it. He leans forward, stretching his arms to touch his toes.

"Guess I have to go shower then."

Injuries and Meetings

Chapter Summary

Warnings for brief mentions of past homophobia.

It doesn't take long to establish a routine at home. Steve is grateful that he'd rented a three bed apartment in the event of Bucky and Sam coming to live with him. It had been a topic of conversation many nights on the road with Sam, back when they were still tracking the Winter Solider. For all the talk, Steve is still amazed that they ended up here. The apartment is small but Bucky says it's better than his underground prison and that's all that matters really.

Whenever possible, Bucky's outside. He joins the pair on morning runs and he delights in every other Saturday being a takeout night, eager to go on the walk to collect the food. He goes to therapy sessions twice a week in Sam's car and tries to convince Sam that their journeys are only a tedious necessity, but Sam sees straight through it. Before long they have teasing rapport and several in-jokes that Steve isn't privy to. But it's okay, because Steve begins to think of Bucky as happy, as his own person. He starts to see more of the man that he was.

One such example of this occurs not long after Bucky has moves in.

Sam is out on a date but due back at any moment. Sprawled out on the couch, Steve punches a few buttons into the TV remote and sets up Netflix. He'd been looking forward to sitting down all day and the instant relief he'd felt was remarkable. Now he manoeuvres himself into optimal viewing position with ease. Sam had been raving on about this film for days and truth be told, Steve is excited. Since waking up in the twenty first century Steve had been attempting to catch up with the highlights of pop culture and, since pop culture refused to wait for him, it had been a daunting task. Sometimes Bucky joins him on his trek through the decades but more often than not he finds his own thing to do.

Steve's text alert goes off – a bald eagle's screech - and he smiles as he makes a mental note to find out who keeps changing his ringtone. Sam has just texted to say that he won't be home tonight. Steve looks at his phone and puts it on the arm of the couch as it sends back his acknowledging reply. With a sigh, Steve decides to just watch it alone. Bucky had already said he wasn't interested and he'd taken himself off to his room to read. Steve presses play.

He's about 40 minutes into the film when he's suddenly glad Sam isn't with him. On screen, the main character is being subjected to homophobic jeers and shouts. Steve can't help the tears that prickle in the corners of his eyes, or the way he tenses and digs his nails into his arms. The main character looks nothing like the scrawny, sickly boy who'd grown up in an equally cruel environment, yet Steve can still relate to him.

At that moment, Bucky steps into the living room. His hair is mussed as if he took a nap instead of reading his book and he's dressed in flannel and sweats. Nothing about him looks like the kid who once saved Steve from bullies. Everything about him looks soft and comforting. He sees Steve's red eyes and he stops dead.

“What's going on?”

But he doesn't need to wait for a reply as the TV shouts a barrage of insults that cause Bucky to stiffen. Without another word he crosses the floor, picks up the remote and switches off the film before sitting down next to Steve. He waits.

Steve takes a moment to compose himself and press the heel of his hands to his eyes. He doesn't want Bucky to see him cry over a stupid movie.

"You weren't always so big," Bucky's words are uncertain, gentle, "I remember. You were getting beat up again in some alley but you weren't fighting back this time. I reckon you couldn't. All them beating on you and calling you queer and you just took it."

He stops and Steve can't tell if he means to continue. That Bucky remembers something like that feels wrong and Steve can't help slinking down in his seat, looking for all the world like a child instead of a superhero. Bucky opens his mouth again but shuts it quickly. Instead, he reaches out and puts his flesh and blood arm around Steve and pulls him onto his shoulder. It's surprisingly intimate for them, but under the circumstances Steve doesn't notice. He rests his head on Bucky's shoulder, shuts his eyes, and tries not to think about the past.

He remembers, of course. Bucky came to his rescue that day (as he had on many occasions) only that time he'd been really hacked off afterwards. Normally he was against Steve fighting at all but it seemed that Steve being in a fight and not trying to defend himself was even worse. Steve had slept at Bucky's that night, ignoring his injuries and wondering if the beating was deserved.

Steve falls asleep like that, anchored in the increasingly familiar smell of Bucky and the feeling of warm, comforting skin.

He wakes the next day in his own bed and his clothes from the day before. The mattress beside him is cold.

*

After a few successful weeks in their apartment, Steve starts to bring Bucky to the Avengers tower (Tony still tries to call it Stark tower, but he lost that fight when he designed, built and gave each avenger their own floor). In the past Steve and Sam had taken turns to stay home with Bucky when the team called them in on business and it was beginning to annoy the ex-assassin. He'd grown frustrated with the arrangement and had protested the need for a babysitter.

Steve tugs at his shirt nervously as he, Sam and Bucky wait outside the usual meeting room in the tower. He'd opted for plain clothes today seeing as there was no pressing mission at hand. The fabric of his collar rubs his neck uncomfortably and he runs a finger between it and his constricted Adam's apple. All he achieves is momentary respite at the front and a sharper dig in the back of his neck.

With an exasperated huff, Bucky leans forward and unbuttons Steve's shirt by two buttons, slapping his hand away when Steve tries to protest. "We're not in the army anymore, Rogers. You won't get court marshalled for two buttons."

Sam laughs at Steve's expression and drums a rhythm on his legs as they wait. Usually everyone is more or less on time for meetings but Steve had made them arrive early just in case. In case of *what*, he isn't sure.

"Quit babying me, Bucky," Steve complains half-heartedly.

"Like you ain't been treating me like a babe since I got here," Bucky counters with a grin.

Sam roll his eyes at the two men.

Pepper Potts arrives first, which is unusual as her focus has always been on Stark Industries, not the Avengers. She greets the men with a polite smile and handshakes, not saying anything when Bucky hesitates to meet her warm grip.

“Shall we go ahead and settle in? Everyone else should be here shortly.” It’s phrased as a suggestion but there’s no saying no to her and the three men follow the sharp click of her heels into the room.

At once Bucky positions himself so that he can see the whole room from his seat. He’s not quite backed into the corner of the room but neither is he too close to the door. Steve wonders if he even realises the tactical decisions he makes as he sits. He joins him.

Slowly the other avengers arrive in pairs or solo. Bruce and Natasha walk in together, laughing over a joke that wasn’t in English. They’re followed by Maria Hill, who works for Stark Industries as a cover to her real job at SHIELD. She sits with Pepper and the two immediately launch into discussion over net profits of the latest Stark prototype. Clint and Tony are the last to arrive, coffee mugs in hand as they take their seats.

A silence falls.

“Shall we get to it?” Maria asks, mimicking Pepper’s gift for phrasing a statement as a question.

Behind her, the entire wall turns into a screen and flashes images of what Steve recognises as Natasha’s latest mission. He tracks her tiny figure running over an unfamiliar landscape being chased by what looks like doombots.

“You’ve already been debriefed, Agent Romanov, but you said there was something you wanted to bring up in this meeting?” Maria prompts.

Natasha nods and leans forward on her elbows, locking eyes with her teammates in a manner that reminds Steve of something predatory.

“Doom’s got Stark tech. I don’t know how he acquired it but he’s not hesitating to bastardise it and use it for his own ends.”

That catches Tony’s attention immediately. “You’re telling me Dr Green Hood got his hands on my stuff and I didn’t know? Why didn’t I know? Do we not take stock anymore? Inventory, anyone?” he directs the last few questions at Pepper who fixes him with a sharp look.

Steve really can’t abide Tony when he’s being like this. The petulant tone of his voice speaks more of a child sulking over the theft of a toy than a superhero worried about the safety of civilians. He wonders how Howard raised a kid like this, momentarily forgetting that +++++Tony is older than him.

“There’s a plan in place to send Barton and Bishop to retrieve the tech but we thought it was worth sharing with everyone here. We also need to discuss Sergeant Barnes’ first publicity appearance.” Maria’s voice recaptures Steve’s attention, “The public needs to know that SHIELD apprehended the Winter Soldier, successfully deprogrammed him and helped him on his way to becoming a trusted ally.”

At once half the people in the room glance at Bucky as if he won’t notice. Maria’s words hang in the air, itching to be contested.

“And is he? Trusted?” Clint pipes up.

“He’s certainly not deaf,” Bucky snaps.

"That makes one of us then," Clint shoots back with a grin and a middle finger.

The silence returns. Steve suddenly thinks this is the moment where he’s meant to vouch for Bucky’s loyalty. He opens his mouth to speak but is beaten to the punch.

“Barnes has displayed no murderous tendencies since moving in with me and Steve. That is, if you don’t count his reaction to hearing that his team had moved states since he’d been in the fridge.” Sam shoots everyone a winning smile and continues, “I’ve been around hundreds of vets and this guy is no more unhinged than the rest of them.”

“You expect us to believe he’s not dangerous?” Bruce asks with an air of scepticism.

“Not at all. He could kill us all with his metal hand tied behind his back. What I’m saying is that he *won’t*.”

Sam’s words are so assured that Steve can’t help the emotion that rises up in his throat. He clamps his mouth shut and nudges him under the table with his knee, grinning in thanks when Sam looks at him.

“I didn’t ask to be part of the team,” Bucky says quietly. All eyes dart to him, “I didn’t ask to be part of SHIELD. As far as I’m concerned my loyalty is still to the Howling Commandos and their captain, but don’t ask me for more than that. Maybe later I’ll change my mind but right now I just found out I damn near died for nothing and I spent the last 70 years on the wrong side of the battlefield.” he sucks in a steadying breath, “There’s a lot I have to undo and I don’t think pulling on a sparkly suit and getting into more fights is the place to start.”

Steve had suspected that Bucky wouldn’t want to return to combat so soon, if at all, but it wasn’t something they’d spoken about. Dimly, he wonders what else Bucky has decided without telling Steve. He waits for someone to argue, to say that Bucky’s service is the least he could offer after everything – but no one does. Instead there’s a general air of agreement, a few nods, and Maria makes a note on her tablet.

“In that case Sergeant Barnes, with your permission I’ll put you down as a consultant. You’ll have the lowest level security clearance, enough to access SHIELD servers and to get into the tower alone, but nothing more. If you like,” and here she pauses, “Sergeant, the offer to join SHIELD will remain a permanent one. Even if you decide to engage no higher I’ll see to it that you’re cleared to accompany the Captain on any mission he undertakes, should you chose to. Coulson might not like it, but better to give you permission now than forgiveness later.”

"That sounds good to me, ma'am."

The conversation moves on to other topics and Steve finds Bucky's hand under the table and squeezes. Bucky shows no sign of acknowledgement, but his hand squeezes back. Steve's mouth curls into a smile and he tilts his head as he tries to focus on Bruce’s complaints about lax safety regulations in the tower’s lab.

Baths and Bruises

Chapter Summary

Short chapter but full of fluff

He's having a bad day. Water fills the tub of bath with a loud, constant drone and Steve spends several moments fiddling with the taps until he settles on a temperature that he likes. He sits on the edge of the tub and his eyes land on the Elvis rubber duck on the other side. Sam had said it was a present from an ex after a holiday together and he'd passionately defended its right to occupy the communal bathroom. The little duck has a studded white paint jacket and a tiny black quiff. Capitalism is a peculiar thing.

Finally the water level is high enough to be satisfactory and Steve gets to his feet, toes curling as they submerge into the bubbles. He releases a trapped sigh as he sinks into the pleasantly warm water. Leaning back, he debates the merits of just falling asleep in the tub. Maybe the serum would prevent him pruning, he hadn't tested that theory yet. It's tempting.

He's just closing his eyes when he hears the front door open and close. There's a tense few seconds as Steve remembers he didn't lock the bathroom door, convinced he'd be home alone for at least an hour. He hopes that whoever is in the apartment isn't here to kill him, because fighting in the nude is not something he ever wants to repeat. In the back of his mind he makes a note to speak to Tony about his terrible security system.

He relaxes when he recognises the footfalls as Bucky's, slower and not as heavy as Sam's. Steve listens to the metallic drop of keys in a bowl, the thump of boots being kicked off. The steps resume and come to a halt outside the bathroom door.

They had argued earlier. Bucky had expressed interest in learning mechanics and engineering, going as far as to mention that he'd been looking up college courses. He had seemed genuinely interested in doing something productive with his time. He hadn't expected Steve to shut him down.

It wasn't that Steve felt like Bucky shouldn't be allowed to make his own life choices – after everything with HYDRA it was only right that the man be allowed to exert his free will. Steve was struggling with the unknown of it all, of a car back firing and triggering Bucky's PTSD, or a fellow student recognising him and trying to harm Bucky. He knows he has to let Bucky lead his own life, he has to trust him, but his fears are overwhelming. All he could think during the argument was that he couldn't risk losing Bucky again.

“Can I come in?”

That was unexpected.

“I'm in the bath,” Steve says.

“We used to bathe together before the war,” comes the reply.

Steve hears the uncertain tone in his voice and wonders how sure Bucky is of that. He's right

though. They used to bathe together in their apartment in the '30s in a frugal effort at keeping the water bill down. At first they'd tried with Bucky just using Steve's bath water once he was done but he would complain about the temperature and colour, with blood being mixed in ever so often. He'd shut up when Steve had pulled him in with him one evening. It never escalated to anything beyond two friends bathing like little kids, but it was a fond set of memories.

"...Door's unlocked."

He doesn't look over as Bucky opens the door and locks it behind him. He shuts his eyes and thinks about their argument with a frown.

There's a dull thud as Bucky's jeans hit the floor, belt and all. Steve jumps at the sudden noise. He hadn't actually expected Bucky to strip off and join him. Keeping his eyes firmly shut, he tries to think of anything other than the man undressing mere inches out of his reach. Now is *not* the time to indulge anything other than reconciliation. Even so, his cock twitches.

The rest of Bucky's clothes soon follow. The metal of his arm makes a scrapping noise when it brushes the tiled wall. Steve briefly wonders if the arm is waterproof. That wasn't something Coulson had divulged to him after Bucky's many tests. He gets his answer when Bucky climbs into the tub and sits between Steve's legs, his back almost against Steve's chest. The inside of his calves brush against Bucky's bare skin and he has to take a second to picture Fury's disapproving face before he can calm down.

Steve opens his eyes and for a moment he doesn't know what to say.

Bucky's back is a landscape. It's dotted with brown hills, littered with winding red country lanes and features the odd black and blue lake. The moles are the same as he remembers from their past and even the bruises weren't an uncommon sight, though their placement always changed. It's the scars that give him pause. It's that Steve can't tell which scars are from enemies and which had been from Bucky's handlers, because he doesn't doubt many of these are. They cover his skin and boast of stories that Steve doesn't know, never got to share in.

Bucky draws his legs up to his body and leans forward to rest his chin on his knees, head falling forward. His spine stands out a little too much for Steve's liking.

"You once said you'd follow me," Steve starts.

There's a nod so he continues.

"But truth is I followed you too, Buck. Followed you in the schoolyard, on double dates, even to Europe."

Bucky starts to protest but Steve pokes him on his unbruised skin. "Hold it. Thing is, I know I'm doing the right thing when I'm with you. And things as they are now – well I don't always know what to do. Our enemies aren't all wearing one uniform anymore, Buck. I don't- I don't know if I should be part of SHIELD when Bucky Barnes is walking away."

He feels awful as soon as he's said it. The words feel like a guilt trip instead of a confession. Water swirls around him and carries the bubbles off to Bucky's end of the tub as if it senses he doesn't deserve them.

"Steve-

"No, Bucky. Forget I said it. I don't want you to join SHIELD on my account and I don't want you to give up the chance of a fresh start just because I'm not comfortable with it yet. I just... just need

to process it and figure out what I'm doing."

He leans forward and rests his forehead on Bucky's back. The boundaries between them are getting harder to distinguish and for now Steve is inclined to take advantage. Besides, if Bucky is okay with sharing a bath together then Steve reckons he wouldn't object to this. He doesn't, and Steve breathes out slowly. The air rushes forward and closes the gap between his lips and Bucky's skin. It connects them even as he inhales.

"I found a college," Bucky whispers.

He speaks as though it's a secret, as though he's waiting for Steve to repeat their argument from the morning. But Steve can't. He knows he's in the wrong. Bucky deserves more from him. He watches the water slowly grow murkier and he tries to summon up some cheer. He's ashamed when instead his voice comes out tired.

"Okay, Buck. Okay."

There's quiet for a short time and the water is getting cold when Bucky speaks again.

"You gonna wash my hair or what, Rogers? Don't you know I'm helpless as a drowned kitten?"

Steve lets out a surprised laugh and reaches behind him to retrieve a plastic cup kept by the bath. Obediently, he fills it and reaches forward to gently angle Bucky's head back. The brunet tilts his head up, shutting his eyes. A small smile graces his lips as the water trickles down onto his scalp. Steve's under no illusions that Bucky can't do this himself, but he can't deny the satisfaction that comes when he finishes wetting the hair and starts to caress shampoo through the thick strands. Bucky hums softly and Steve forgets that this had been a bad day.

Art and Armour

Chapter Summary

It's not a Captain America fic without art!

Something Steve has loved since waking up in this century is the development of art over the decades. He has subscriptions to art magazines, owns a high-end graphics tablet and has made generous donations to local galleries featuring new artists. His favourite thing, however, is his membership at both the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“You know, most dates prefer restaurants or cinemas,” Bucky quips, tilting his head to the side to get a better view of Albrecht Dürer’s Adam and Eve.

Steve rolls his eyes and drags him out of the shot of a tourist’s photo. “There’s the roof garden café if you’re hungry? We could get lunch now and carry on with the rest after.”

They navigate their way around a guided tour group. Bucky’s eyes pounce from one person to the next, assessing each as a potential threat even as he replies, “No, I can wait. What’s next?”

Steve checks the slip of paper in his hands. He’s got the building half memorised by now but Bucky doesn’t know that. Instead of looking at the next room he’s searching for something that might interest his friend. While Steve could spend a lifetime in art museums, he thinks Bucky might treat it as torture. With a satisfied grin, he jabs his finger to the map and holds it up for Bucky to see.

“What about Arms and Armour?”

And that’s how Steve finds himself sat on a bench on the first floor some twenty minutes later. Bucky is still totally engrossed in the jousting armour on display and he hasn’t moved from his spot for at least three full minutes now. Steve watches with a sappy expression on his face, glad to have found something they could both enjoy.

However, there’s only so long he can sit and do nothing so he reaches into his satchel and removes his current sketchbook and pencil. He flips through to his last sketch and takes a moment to remember what he had planned for the series of shapes decorating the smudged page. Turning the book to landscape, he suddenly remembers that he’s looking at a cityscape, specifically the skyline from one of the floors on the Avengers tower. Now he knows what he’s looking at, the shapes form buildings and rooftops. They expand in detail in his mind, urging his hand to move and capture them before he can forget again. Under his pencil billboards come into existence, promoting half-fictional products. Birds are born into the sky and bear witness to the first tendrils of cloud spiralling outwards.

“You’re real good,” a little voice by Steve’s elbow says, causing his line to veer slightly. “Oh no!”

“It’s okay, no harm done.” Steve looks over and sees a young girl staring in horror at the surprise addition to Steve’s drawing. She can’t be older than nine, with hair as blonde as his and eyes as blue as Bucky’s. Her whole face scrunches up and Steve is terrified she might start to cry.

“Here, look,” he flips his pencil over and erases the line. “Good as new.”

The little girl looks unsure but it’s a step away from crying at least. She fidgets as she stands and points to the sketchbook.

“You draw buildings really well but it’s not colourful like the paintings downstairs.”

Steve laughs at that, loud enough to draw Bucky’s attention away from the display cases. Their eyes meet for a moment and they share a smile across the busy room. Steve’s smile is the forced one he used to wear when a baby was pressed into his arms for press photos on his Captain America tour. Bucky’s returning grin is toothy and wolfish, an acknowledgement of Steve’s discomfort and amused that nothing had changed after all these years.

“What’s your name, miss?” Steve asks.

“Cleo.”

“Thank you, Cleo. I’ll get some colour on it right away. Are you with someone? You aren’t lost are you?”

Shaking her head, Cleo points to a woman not far from Bucky and identifies her as her mother. She worries her bottom lip.

“Are *you* alone?” she seems genuinely worried.

Steve once again finds Bucky in the crowd. The metal arm is hidden away under long sleeves and a casual hand in a pocket but Bucky still stands out in a crowd thanks to his strapping muscles and persistent vaguely uncomfortable expression.

“No, I’m with a friend,” he smiles.

Looking unconvinced, Cleo wriggles her shoulders and pulls off a backpack that’s so tiny Steve hasn’t noticed it until now. He watches her unzip the main pocket and root around in it for a moment. After a few seconds her face lights up and she pulls out a handful of colourful pencil crayons. She offers them up to Steve with a beam.

“You don’t need to do that,” he protests, heart clenching as her face drops a little.

“Mummy says we should always be nice to people by themselves,” She waves the crayons, “And you really, really need more colours.”

Steve laughs at that, his unease with children ebbing if only for this one conversation.

“In that case, it would be rude of me to refuse. Your mother sounds like a clever lady. Thank you.”

Cleo seems to consider that as she reseals her backpack and pulls it back onto her shoulders.

“That’s what mom says too. You should make that bit red,” she instructs, pointing.

And there isn’t anything to say to that except another thank you and a promise to colour until the edges of the page curl inwards. Satisfied, Cleo gives Steve a wave and scampers off to find one of her mothers. Steve watches her go with a dopey grin and a handful of red, yellow and blue. He fully intends to keep his promise but he finds himself turning to a fresh page and capturing the wholesome face of the first child not to recognise Captain America in public.

He’s just shading her dimples when a shadow spills over the page.

“Who was that?”

“My biggest fan,” Steve replies with a quirk of his lips, eyes never leaving the book.

Bucky sits next to him on the bench, movements slow and graceful. There was a time when he would have just thrown himself down. Steve wishes he could stop comparing Bucky’s past self to this new man.

“Thought I was your biggest fan.”

Jokes haven’t quite found a home in Bucky yet. They fall flat more often than not and most come out in deadpan tones. This one is much the same; Steve only recognises it as a joke because he’s training himself to read Bucky. He closes his book with a secretive snap.

“This fan has actually seen something I’ve drawn this century, so I think the little lady has the edge.”

A growl answers him and for a second Steve thinks it’s Bucky. He blushes when he realises it’s just his stomach. Muttering something about lunch, he packs his equipment away and gets to his feet. He’s about to ask Bucky if he’s coming when he notices the expression on the brunet’s face.

“Draw me.” It’s not quite a demand but neither is there anything uncertain in that tone. Bucky speaks like a man who has been mulling over a decision for a while and has finally come to rest on the right option. “Draw me.”

“What?” Steve’s brain is short circuiting.

Frowning, Bucky stands. He tucks a strand of hair behind his ear; flesh and blood hand reaching back to check that his ponytail is intact. Tugging it slightly, he tries to meet Steve’s gaze as he answers.

“I was thinking...you used to draw me all the time, but you don’t do it so much now. Used to be I’d catch you in the act all weeklong but now it’s like you ain’t interested. What’s the matter, Rogers? This model not sexy enough for you anymore?”

Steve misses the slight edge in Bucky’s voice, too distracted by the rush of blood to his face and ears.

“Bucky, there are *children* around.” he whispers, mortified.

“Like they haven’t heard worse.”

This time Steve doesn’t miss the disappointment tinting his best friend’s voice. They’re still standing in a crowded public space and no one seems to be paying them any mind. He thinks that would change if he acting on his sudden impulse to move forward to kiss that look off Bucky’s face. He settles for rolling his shoulders back and scanning the crowd for any possible eavesdroppers.

“Feels dishonest,” he replies, “drawing you when you aren’t looking. I see you napping on the couch like a tomcat in the sun and I wanna get it on paper but I can’t. It’s dumb but I can’t help feeling like it’s another breach of your agency.”

Steve sees Cleo hanging off a woman’s arm as they leave the room. She doesn’t see him but he smiles anyway.

"Steve, I don't mind." Bucky's voice is softer now. "You never needed my permission for that."

Steve hears the lighthearted tone but he keeps his voice level as he replies, "If I'm gonna draw you, Buck, I want you to go ahead. Matter of fact, that goes for anything. Your consent is important to me."

Bucky wraps an arm around him. When he speaks the words don't match the thickness of his voice, "Well Captain, let's skip lunch and head home. You've got a masterpiece to create."

There's no resistance from Steve save the growl of his stomach and he laughs in an embarrassed fashion to cover it up.

"Now what's a fella gotta do to be drawn in the buff?"

Parks and Sneezes

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: I actually really like Tony Stark and I may have made Steve a bit too critical/mean towards him. No hard feelings!

It's only a day after he draws Bucky that Steve starts to pick up on changes in his friend's actions. Of course Bucky was changing daily thanks to his therapy. He was remembering more, learning more and laughing more. Sam had even said that he noticed Bucky no longer felt compelled to check his car for bombs before entering it.

Mostly it was small differences that Steve was seeing in Bucky. He wasn't ready to tackle the bigger problems like his nightmares (which frequently woke the whole apartment), or his inability to talk about his siblings (whom he said he felt undeserving of), or the panic attacks that could be triggered by a wide degree of words, sounds or actions. The other day an action movie had caused an hour long response, the week before that it had been Steve trying to swat a fly too close to Bucky's head and Bucky thinking he was going to be hit.

Today's development was pet names.

"Pass me that tablet, sweetheart. I want to find our old apartment on Google Earth. Sam said it shouldn't be too hard to find."

Steve tries and fails not to choke on his glass of water. His feels every inch of his body go red as he splutters and sets the glass down on the kitchen worktop. Bucky, kindly, ignores his brush with death and stretches his hand out for the device.

"What was that?" Steve asks weakly.

Bucky eyes him with a wary look and Steve would give every one of his medals to know what he's thinking right now. He leans back on his chair, metal arm heavy on the table for balance. It's hard to say, but he looks nervous. Licking his bottom lip, Bucky starts to say something but is interrupted when Sam walks into the kitchen.

"Morning all," he greets brightly. "What's New York's favourite pair of ninety-somethings got planned for today?"

Steve blinks. "Um, Bucky's got this memory stuck in his head," he trails off, still trying to understand what's going on and why Bucky is staring at him so weirdly.

Pulling out a box of cereal from a cupboard, Sam raises his eyebrows. It's a cue to go on but Steve can't make his voice work. Sam turns to the other super soldier in the room and fixes him with a look that clearly reads as "Explain."

"Yeah I got this picture in my head. I think it's a park? But I can't remember where it is. All I see is trees and a bridge going over a stream. Know anywhere like that in Brooklyn?"

The expression on Bucky's face isn't hopeful and Sam has to disappoint him, "Sorry, Barnes. I'm not even from this state. Steve's your best hope."

Sam fetches the milk from the fridge, pushing Bucky's chair back onto all four legs as he does.

"Hey! You're from DC, right? What made you stay in New York?" Bucky asks.

There's a chuckle from Steve as he hands Sam a spoon. "That'd be my fault. We were out of the country for so long-" he cuts himself off, realising that Bucky might not like to hear that it was his fault Sam no longer had a home to go back to.

Bucky seems to sense the answer anyway. He runs his metal hand through his hair and bites his lip. When he looks up at Sam, it's through a canopy of dark eyelashes.

"Sam," he begins, voice a bit too sweet to be sincere.

"Don't apologise. My landlord was just waiting for an excuse to be rid of me. Besides, everything turned out okay. I'm still pissed about my wings though." Sam is nothing if not truthful.

There's a guilty grin from Bucky and Sam shoots him a mock salute before grabbing his bowl of cereal. "Anyway, I got promoted to Avenger! Things have a way of working out."

Steve thinks it's enchanting how Sam can make him believe that with just a smile. He really hopes his friend is right. Bucky seems to be thinking the same thing if his face is anything to go by. There's an expression of hope lingering on his features. Just like casual clothes and man-buns, this expression suits him.

"Good luck finding your park. I'll be at the tower if anyone breaks the GPS and needs my help again," Sam teases.

He skips out of the kitchen cackling at the experience of being simultaneously flipped off by two ninety five year olds.

*

"This isn't it," Bucky says.

It's nearly 3pm and they're walking through what has to be the thirtieth park of the day. This one is really no more than a glorified field in drag, achieving park status only by the sparse prickling of trees off to one side. It's relatively devoid of life beyond their own. Most children would still be in school right now and anyone else who might have decided to go for a walk was almost certainly put off by the dark clouds threatening to burst over the city.

"Is there any point asking if you're sure or should we just get back on the bike?" Steve replies, eyes on the dirt path.

"Why does it matter, Steve? It's just a park. I gave up ten stops ago."

Bucky's using that voice he employs when he steadfastly *does not* want to do something. In the past he'd used it often against his friend and Steve still hadn't found a way to refuse. Part of him wants to give up too. The serum in his veins made him stronger but it couldn't stop him outright aching or getting tired. Right now his feet felt like cinder blocks.

"You said your therapist wanted you to find this park so you could pin it down in your head. If she thinks it'll help then we should carry on."

"It coulda been paved over for all we know. One loose memory rattling around inside my skull ain't gonna do any more harm, Stevie. Maybe I'll just remember all of a sudden one day, like I did

with your middle name.”

Now there was something worth talking about.

“About my name,” Steve swerves to avoid a puddle, “You called me ‘sweetheart’ earlier.”

It’s both a question and an accusation, though neither one are given force. The statement hangs in the air with the flies.

It’s Bucky’s turn to go red now, though he doesn’t quite achieve it on the same scale as Steve had in the kitchen. He tugs at his jacket and crosses his arms over his chest defensively. He won’t meet Steve’s eye.

“Just trying it out,” he mumbles.

Steve thinks that’s a peculiar answer and he wants to say as much. His hand goes to his chest and he feels the bump of a chain underneath his shirt. He’s slow to reply.

“Call me whatever you want, Buck. You know I’ve had worse.”

Bucky huffs a laugh and deliberately walks into Steve to push him off balance. “Yeah, I remember.”

They wander the park for a few more minutes, enjoying simply being outside, until the clouds finally decide to ruin their afternoon and fat droplets of rain start to descend. One gets Steve in the eye and he blinks it out. The pair sprint back to Steve’s bike only to find the seat sodden and their helmets half full of rain water. They hop on with unhappy grunts and Bucky winds his arms around Steve’s waist as the latter kicks off the stand.

By the time they’re back at the apartment they’re as wet as they were that afternoon on the Potomac’s shore. Bucky is jumping off the bike even as it rolls to a halt in the street outside their building. He’s inside in a flash, grabbing Steve’s tarpaulin from the hall cupboard and chuck it to Steve. Steve throws the tarpaulin over his beloved bike before chasing after Bucky.

“Shotgun the Iron Man towel!” Bucky calls, taking the stairs two at a time.

Steve doesn’t bat an eyelid as he follows, though he does spare a thought to wonder if Tony was aware that the set of Avengers towels he’d jokingly bought as a moving in present actually got used. There was something satisfying about using the billionaire’s face to dry his ass. He liked him more now, it was true, but it was still funny.

They pile into the apartment as though being chased and neither wastes a moment before going to their respective bedrooms to strip off the wet garments. It’s in his room that Steve realises he didn’t pick up a towel before diving into his room. His naked body is already taking on a bluish tinge. He darts out of his bedroom and into the (blessedly) empty bathroom. The airing cupboard is already open and Steve selects a towel from the top of the pile, not paying attention to the pattern before wrapping it around his waist.

There’s a wolf whistle and Steve turns to see Bucky leaning against the door frame. The brunet gives him an approving once over and Steve can’t help but do the same. Like him, Bucky is just wearing a towel around his waist. His long hair looks as though it got a quick scrub with the towel but it still drips onto his broad shoulders in a way that’s so very distracting.

“You know, it’s still weird to see so much of you,” Bucky says, gesturing at the mass of muscle that is Steve’s body.

Steve doesn't know what to say to that. He notices that Bucky's eyes are focused on his chest and he looks down too. There, hanging from a simple chain is his gold ring. It gleams against his skin and warms Steve to look at. Funny, how he forgot it was there.

"I used to get so worried when you got caught in the rain," Bucky's eyes are still on the ring but they're unfocused now, drifting, "I'd fuss over you like a mother hen and give you my jacket like it wasn't fulla holes. Didn't make a damn bit of different though. The cold got into your lungs anyway."

Steve remembers. Bucky's jacket had been brown leather and at least three sizes too big for him but he loved it. The weight of it on his shoulder had felt like the arm he longed for. He had no jealousy for dames who got the treatment all the time, but having Bucky's jacket had felt significant. He only got it when he was sick or when Bucky thought it was too cold for him. He had hated being treated like a delicate object but there was no denying the perks. Thinking back, Steve reckons it would have been impossible for him not to fall in love with his best friend.

"So we had to get you warm in other ways," Bucky carries on, voice low and gravelly, "Unless I dreamed it."

It was an unspoken prompt for Steve to take control of the conversation. He doesn't want to though. They hadn't spoken about it before because it wasn't something that friends *did*, not even best friends. But each time Bucky had said it could keep Steve warm enough to save his life and each time Steve had acquiesced as though he wasn't yearning for Bucky's touch. It's enough to make him wish he still weighed 95 pounds.

"We would strip to our skivvies, share body heat in the same bed. You said it worked better without any layers in the way so-" he can't finish his thought.

Bucky is walking toward him. One hand is anchored to his towel but the other hangs loose, fingers twitching. He looks like he's going to devour Steve. He looks like he's going to reach out. He looks like he's remembered something.

Bucky sneezes.

There's a split second then Steve is laughing at the astonished expression on Bucky's face. Somehow, he pulls a wad of toilet paper off the roll with just one hand to spare and passes it to the sniffing soldier.

"Let's put a pot of coffee on," he suggests, smiling even as he flees.

*

Bucky continues to use pet names for Steve after that, regardless of how much Steve blushes. The blond wonders if it's some sort of game Tony or Clint taught him. Bucky had always been fond of teasing but that didn't seem to fit. He can't put his finger on it.

"Maybe he thinks that's just how people address their friends today?" a flustered Bruce suggests when Steve asks his advice.

In his defence, Steve hadn't meant to corner the poor doctor in the tower's lab. He'd paid the visit in the hopes of Tony being present so that they could talk about the frankly terrible security system he'd recommended for Steve. It had woken them all up the night before over a guilty looking tabby cat resting on the small balcony.

"But he never hears me or Sam say it," Steve protests.

Bruce looks like he'd rather be anywhere else on earth. "It's really not my area, Captain. Oh look, here's Tony. Why don't you go ask him about that cat problem?"

Tony isn't any happier to see Steve than Bruce was.

Coffee and Orgasms

Chapter Summary

Changed the rating of this fic to explicit for obvious reasons. New tags too, yay!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nearly half a year after Bucky moves into the apartment, he's officially given permission to be out in public without a chaperone. Seeing as he's due to start his first semester at college in a matter of weeks, Steve thinks this is cutting it rather close. Coulson calls Steve personally to congratulate him on the progress Bucky has been making and he says that it's no longer felt that the dietitian is necessary either. He adds that Tony is planning a party at the tower in honour of Pepper's birthday and he hopes to see Steve, Bucky and Sam there. Steve promises he'll tell the others.

Telling Sam doesn't go quite like he imagined.

They're in a coffee shop doing the drinks run for everyone at the tower when Steve remembers the invite. Their conversation since leaving the tower had been minimal due to the frankly alarming amount of information they had to remember just to purchase eight coffees. He's just thinking of the right way to say "Coulson invited us to Pepper's birthday party" when Sam clicks his tongue and beats him to the punch.

"With all those ladies Natasha tried to hook you up with, I never realised you were gay," He says it as if Steve hadn't grown up in a time where that could have been a death sentence.

Steve feels his chest constrict in a way that it hasn't since he was cured of his asthma. He forces himself to take a few shallow breaths. Sam side-eyes Steve and bunches his hands up into his jacket pockets. "Hey I'm not judging: you know how I felt about Riley."

Steve did. That didn't mean he was any less confused by the sudden (and somewhat intrusive) speculation on his sexuality. But Sam was one of his best friends.

"I'm not-" his throat closes up and he takes a moment to remember that it's okay to say it now, "I'm not gay. I'm bisexual."

No one in the queue around them reacts. No one jumps him. No one kicks him out the building or demands to see him outside. All that happens is the queue moves forward as another customer is served. Steve's heart is hammering beneath his shirt. He knows the future still has its problems with people like him but he also knows most people don't. Still, he doesn't start to relax until Sam lightly punches him on the shoulder.

"I'm happy for you," is all he says.

Steve doesn't think to ask what he means. The person in front of them moves away from the counter and Steve is suddenly distracted with rattling off several long and complicated coffee orders.

It isn't until they're back at the tower and handing Bruce his soy latte that Steve suddenly tells Sam

about the invites.

“Does this mean we have to get Pepper a proper gift?” he muses, sipping on a Frappuccino, “Because I was just gonna bake her a batch of those lemon cakes she likes. Either way, I’ll be your wingman.”

*

If telling Sam about the party had gone off track, then telling Bucky had gone off the *planet*. In fact, Steve was in bed when it happened.

He’s lying on his back, duvet bunched up between him and the wall. Morning sunlight drifts in through the cracks in the wooden blinds and beyond he can hear birds chirping. It’s certainly a step up from last week’s wake up, which had involved a 3AM phone call and an urgent order to get to the tower immediately. This is Steve’s first lie in since dealing with the week-long terror threat that had disturbed his sleep. He intends to make good use of it.

Steve may be America’s golden boy but it was easy to forget that the boy was actually a man with needs. His pretty blue eyes hide fantasies the likes of which he’d be embarrassed to own up to. But today he doesn’t need to waste too much time on fantasies. He’s woken up erect, uncommon for him but not unusual.

Wasting no time, he reaches down to his sweatpants and feels himself through the layer of thick fabric. He’s not yet fully hard. The fabric between his skin gives both friction and the illusion that it’s not his own hand on his dick. His fingertips trace lines up and down his length in a controlled fashion. His breathing hitches and his eyes fall shut.

In his mind it’s Bucky. It’s always Bucky. The hand pulling off and dragging his pants down to his knees is smaller, more calloused. The nails scraping gently up his inner thighs are dirtier, shorter. If he really concentrates, he can pretend the hand yanking his knees up is metal. That’s the only real change in the fantasies that have been with him since he was a teen. The metal hand locks around a flesh and blood wrist but it’s no good. The illusion wavers and he defaults to picturing the old Bucky.

This time both arms are flesh and blood. He grasps himself in his right hand and sets a steady rhythm for both hand and hips. His free hand roams up over his taunt stomach. The contact makes him shiver even as the hand goes higher. His thumb grazes a nipple at the same second his other brushes over his slit. Steve arches his back violently, biting down on his lip to contain a cry. He pictures Bucky leaning over him, whispering encouragement as he worries Steve’s nipple and tugs on his dick. He isn’t sure what Bucky would say to him though. Would it be filthy obscenities or tender praise?

After a time, he feels the first signs of his impending orgasm and rocks up faster into his fist. Strands of hair tickle at his forehead. Steve starts to reach up to brush them away when his hand touches something cold. He opens his eyes and finds the chain with his ring – Bucky’s ring – lying just below his throat. Steve grabs it in his free hand. He remembers the look on Bucky’s face when he’d thrust it into Steve’s hand and that’s all Steve needs.

He keeps his hold on the ring through his orgasm and rides the aftershocks with the small piece of jewellery digging into his palm. When he’s done, his hands fall limply beside him and he takes a few minutes to catch his breath. As soon as he can feel his toes, he reaches under his pillow and retrieves a handful of tissues. There isn’t a lot of point cleaning up seeing as he plans on having a shower in a moment, but Steve had no desire to walk through the apartment with a stomach coated in semen.

Once the tissues are crumpled in his trashcan he sits back down on his bed and holds the ring up and away from his chest. He eyes it with a mixed array of emotions. Bucky had given it to him before the war and that should fill his lovesick heart with joy, but it wasn't quite as straightforward as that.

It was two days before Bucky was due to get his orders and be shipped off to god knows where. The atmosphere in their apartment had been tense to say the least. Steve hadn't seen Bucky an awful lot over the past few days, knowing that the older boy was spending a lot of time with his younger sisters. They didn't have Steve's belief that Bucky would come back to them. It had felt wrong to intrude, so Steve hadn't been accompanying Bucky on his visits home. He spent his time either working shifts at the corner shop down the street or wondering the streets of New York. He couldn't be in the apartment alone without thinking about Bucky leaving.

But on that night he'd decided to stay in. A friend at work knew a little about the situation and had told Steve to spend every moment he could with his buddy while he still had the chance. Steve's gut had twisted unpleasantly at the choice of words.

So when Bucky opened the front door and kicked off his boots, he was surprised to see Steve curled up on the couch with a blanket and the wireless on. The sight filled him with comfort.

"Thought you'd be on the prowl for Brooklyn's latest batch of villains," he said by way of greeting.

Steve shrugged and pulled his blanket tighter around him. His head was pillowed on the arm of the couch and he looked up at Bucky with watery eyes. He tried to take in everything about the other man, watched as he rolled his sleeves up to his elbows and exposed the fine hairs on his arms. He saw the way Bucky's hair stuck up when he removed his hat and he smiled as Bucky tried in vain to tame it. He also saw a familiar expression on his friend's face; though one he was unused to seeing when he was (moderately) healthy.

"Glad you're here actually. Thought I'd be having to tracking you through the streets like a bloodhound."

"Your sense of smell isn't good enough to be a bloodhound, Buck."

The couch squeaks as Bucky threw himself down and sprawled out. He rested his feet on the coffee table full of sketches of nature and scenery, pouting when Steve kicked his feet off.

"I beg to differ, you ain't so rosy smelling you know. When's the last time you bathed?" Bucky waved his hand in front of his nose for added effect.

"When we could last afford it." Steve admitted.

He pulled the blanket tighter around him as if he really believed he smelled and that the scratchy cotton might act as a shield. Bucky looked sad.

"Yeah. Well, see, about that-" he began.

"Oh, Bucky don't start that again. I'll be fine. I'm working at the shop and I won't have'ta worry about buying food enough for two mouths anymore. I'll get by," Steve insisted, kicking Bucky's feet again.

Bucky swallowed past the constricting feeling in his throat. "Sure. You'll get by... until winter comes and you're too sick to work. What will you do then, Stevie? Christ, I can't go and know you-that you won't-" he buried his face in his hands. "I've made arrangements."

His voice was muffled so Steve wrapped his hands around Bucky's wrists and pulled his hands away. Bucky lets him.

"What kind of arrangements?" he asked sharply.

"With the girls. They do much better than us so they don't really need my money but I got them to agree to take some each time I get paid. Rebecca says she'll stop by once a week with fresh bread and maybe some of her toffee if they get enough sugar in the rations. No, don't argue. You can take it up with her."

Steve knew that meant it was a done deal then, there was no arguing with Bucky's youngest sister when she wanted to do something nice. He sighed heavily, nearly enough to make himself cough. Luckily the wireless drowned out any small noise that might have betrayed him.

"The rest of my wages are going to you," Bucky continues. "Don't try to argue that, either. I won't have anything worth spending it on overseas and I'd sure like to know I've got a place to come back to when the war's over."

"I don't like taking your money, Buck. You know that. My momma raised me not to." Steve argued.

"For god's sake, Rogers! What's a guy gotta do? Your bleeding pride will be the death of you."

Bucky let his head fall back against the couch cushions and he frowned at the ceiling. Steve waited for him to finish.

It wasn't that he wanted to make Bucky mad. Sometimes he thinks it would be easier just to accept everything Bucky offered him, no questions asked. There was no denying he needed help. The problem was that Steve was denying it. He wanted to believe he could support himself and not be a burden on anyone else. His mother had run herself into the ground trying to foot his medical bills and he hated it. He hated dragging others down with him.

Still staring at the ceiling, jaw sharp and prominent in the low light, Bucky reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a wedding ring. He cleared his throat.

"Your momma raised you not to take from other people and mine gave me three sisters to provide for. I know my girls will be just fine and I know you'll keep an eye on 'em while I'm away. They love you." He took a deep breath. "I need you to look after my old lady's ring."

He was staring at Steve now. The ring was held tenderly in his right hand, shining faintly and in need of a polish. Steve knew Bucky wasn't asking, but still his mouth went dry.

"You're crazy. I can't look after it. People'll think-"

"Listen, Steve. Just listen to me. I need you to keep it safe because I sure as hell won't be able to look after it once I leave New York. It's all I got left of her besides the girls." Bucky's voice cracked.

Steve's mind whirls frantically and there's an edge of panic in his tone, "So give it to one of them. No reason for me to have it. It'll look- it'll look like-"

"It'll look like a fella is giving his roommate a means to pay the rent if all else fails. Keep it safe, but sell it if you need to. The girls don't mind, they have their own jewellery. My momma gave it to me, so it's mine to give away... and I need you to take it."

Determination was stark in his brow, his jaw, his mouth. He wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Over Steve's shoulder, the wireless was playing something slow and instrumental.

"I'm never gonna sell your momma's wedding ring, Buck," Steve makes his decision. "But I'll look after it. Just until you get back."

For a moment, Bucky looked happier than Steve could ever recall him being. He cherished the smile meant only for him and he pictured it three days later when he purchased a simple chain to wear the ring on. It was now his most important possession; it was going to follow him everywhere.

Steve is jolted back to the present by a knock on his bedroom door. He just has time to scramble under the duvet before the door opens and Bucky waltzes in.

"Still in bed, Rogers? And here I thought you were a morning person now," he grins lazily and crosses his arms over his broad chest.

Steve is all too aware that his own chest is uncovered, the duvet only preserving his modesty from the waist down. His hair is still messy from his morning wank and he prays he isn't breathing too hard. At least his trashcan has a lid, hiding the tissues from sight.

"Here I was thinking you'd learned to knock," Steve shoots back.

Holding his hands up in mock surrender, Bucky's eyes flit down to the ring then back up to Steve's eyes. He's smiling. Can he see the sheen of sweat glistening on the metal? Steve really hopes not.

"Technically I did knock."

"I don't think it counts if you come barging in anyway, Buck."

"It was an emergency."

Steve's ears prick up, suddenly alert. "What happened?"

"Sam told me we're invited to Pepper's birthday party and I don't have a suit."

Steve groans and falls back against the bedhead, hand clamped on the duvet to stop it slipping. "That *really* doesn't qualify as an emergency."

Bucky smirks and looks down at Steve with a hungry gleam in his eye. "I wonder what does count then? What if I happened to hear someone making these awful, *pained* noises in the other room? I'm still on HYDRA's most-wanted list, you know. They could send anyone to break into our home and kill whoever stood between them and me. I heard these *noises* and I worried for you. Does that count, Stevie?"

Steve is glad he's no longer hard because all his blood is now occupied in rushing to pool near the skin in what can only be called a full body blush. He pulls an arm over his eyes and groans pitifully.

"That's the noise!" Bucky informs him cheerfully.

Without looking, Steve grabs a pillow and throws it in Bucky's general direction. "We are *not* having this conversation."

He's disappointed when he hears Bucky catch the pillow.

"Is that an order, Captain?" That tone of voice is downright obscene and it goes straight to Steve's

groin.

Steve knows Bucky is just teasing him but his dick doesn't appear to know that. Bucky has to leave. Now. Removing his arm from his face, Steve fixes Bucky with his best, most aloof expression that he is physically capable of mustering. If Bucky wants a Captain, he's got one.

"I'm going to take a shower then we'll see about getting you something suitable for Stark's exorbitant party. We depart at 1300 hours, Sergeant. Dismissed."

Bucky blinks in surprise and his eyes don't meet Steve's. He makes no move to leave. Frowning, Steve follows Bucky's line of sight and realises he's looking at the ring again. Steve's hand is closed over it, thumb tracing the metal out of habit. He didn't remember reaching up to touch it.

"Do you want it back?" he asks softly, not quite able to tear his eyes away from his hand.

"I gave it to you."

Bucky's reply is so quiet that Steve isn't entirely sure he even said it. The words sound both like a question and a remembered fact. They sound like an answer. Before he can say anything else, Bucky darts out of the room.

Steve processes this reaction then forces himself out of bed. Looks like he's in for a busy day.

Chapter End Notes

One chapter to go! Thank you to everyone who's commented, left kudos, and bookmarked! You're all wonderful

Cake and Cards

Chapter Summary

It's Pepper's birthday party! Pity that sort of gets forgotten...

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the wait on this, everyone! But here we are finally, the last chapter. It had to culminate eventually but fear not, I've got so many other fics planned for this ship it's a little worrying.

Thank you to everyone who has interacted with me during this adventure. I hope the ending is satisfying for you. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The suit Steve finds for Bucky is a simple light grey design that he pairs with a dark blue tie. It perhaps isn't the best they could have found for him, but both men find the array of choice in the twenty first century stores vastly overwhelming. Bucky buys the first suit that Natasha (on the other end of Steve's cell phone) approves of. The cost is enough to make them skip the taxi and walk home. Inflation was more likely to kill them than any of the super villains Steve fought nowadays.

It's amazing, Steve thinks, how Bucky's metal arm fits underneath the garment. The shirt had to have the left sleeve cut off, but with the suit jacket on no one could tell. With a bit of tailoring magic, Bucky looked like a regular guy dressed to celebrate. He had even slicked his hair back into a well-groomed ponytail.

He stands now in the constricting elevator of Avengers tower, hands tight on a small envelop. Despite there being plenty of room (there was only Sam and Steve in the elevator with him) he's all but pressed against the doors. Steve can't quite see his face but he can see the tension in Bucky's jaw.

It's Sam that asks the necessary question.

"Hey Barnes, you okay?"

Steve observes Bucky's whole body become petrified and then watches as it is forcefully relaxed. There's a short, sharp nod from Bucky but otherwise he ignores the question. Worry starts to pool in Steve's mind.

Shifting his cake tin, Sam shrugs and makes a "Your turn" face at Steve.

"You know JARVIS won't play the music in here anymore. Tony-"

"It's not that." Bucky cuts in.

His head tilts back to check how far they are from their destined floor. He looks unhappy when he turns to face the two men behind him. The wrinkle that spans nearly Bucky's entire forehead is prominent under the sharp glare of the harsh lighting. His eyes are wary and he isn't wearing the smile he had on when they had stepped out of the car at the foot of the building.

"Being in a space like this," he gestures outwards, "reminds me of the cryo tube they stuck me in."

He can't help it, Steve winces. Why hadn't he thought of that? He starts to reach out to Bucky but quickly diverts and runs his hand over his hair instead. As much as he wants to lend a reassuring touch, he feels it would be unwelcome right now. Bucky isn't going to relax until they're out of the space.

"We'll talk the stairs next time." It's a shabby effort, but it's all Steve can think to say.

Bucky looks at Sam as the other nods in the affirmative and he mutters a small thanks.

They arrive on the top floor in silence.

What greets them is a split levelled floor that was built solely for entertaining hundreds of people. It isn't a stretch to say that the entire original 107 unit could have been packed into the room and still had space to dance their heels off. Balloons and streamers cover the ceiling (a large amount of which is just glass). There's a bar on one wall and a small stage against another, with a DJ set up and playing all the hits. A grand staircase leads up to the upper level and though Steve can't see it from where he's standing, he knows there's a balcony up there.

"I'm gonna go dump the presents and find some drinks, back in a few." Sam says before he takes the envelope from Bucky and heads towards a large table boasting a sizeable array of brightly wrapped gifts.

"Mine's a whiskey," Bucky calls after him, already looking a shade better.

Steve smiles to himself and drags Bucky over to a group of people he recognises.

They mingle for a bit, both getting accustom to the crowd. Steve finds that he knows most of the people at the party and those that he doesn't all know him by reputation. He shakes more hands, signs more pieces of paper and smiles for more photos than he thinks is strictly polite. Bucky enjoys every second of it though, even disappearing at one point and coming back with a napkin.

"Oh Captain America, *please* could I get your signature?" he simpers with a breathy voice.

Steve has half a mind to sign Bucky's face instead.

"You can't tell me it's not funny," Bucky argues. "You carry a Sharpie on you *constantly*. Even on your runs."

After some time they find Sam again and join him in a discussion with Bruce Banner. The pair are whispering quietly in a corner of the room and Steve is altogether very suspicious. As he and Bucky approach he sees Bruce glance over at him and look relieved.

"Thank god you're here," Sam says.

Steve goes from suspicious to apprehensive as the two men cross the remaining distance and make a tiny circle with their four bodies, shutting everyone else out.

"How old is Pepper?" Bruce whispers, as though JARVIS might overhear and tell on him to their

hosts.

There's a pause. Bruce looks genuinely worried and Sam is actually biting his lip. It's not what Steve had expected at all.

"I have no idea," Steve says eventually.

A short bark of laughter bursts out of Bucky and he's shoving Sam's shoulder playfully. "That's what you're looking like that for? Don't worry; she won't know you haven't got a clue."

Sam moans and buries his face in his hands. Words tumble out between his fingers but even Steve's enhanced hearing can't make them out. He's about to ask Sam to repeat himself when Bruce explains.

"He baked Pepper's cake into a number he thought was her age, but I'm relatively sure he got it wrong."

Steve's eyebrows raise and Bucky whistles.

"Sounds like someone just got himself kicked off the Christmas card list," Bucky jokes.

It's nice to see Bucky getting along with Sam, Steve thinks. He had been so worried that after the Triskelion Incident there was no hope of building anything between the two, but he had been wrong. He had also been wrong when he thought the other avengers might not want to befriend an ex-soviet assassin.

Bucky's joke draws a chuckle out of Bruce. The doctor looks quite handsome tonight, dressed in black slacks and an emerald shirt. He stood out for reasons beyond the obvious and Steve thought it a shame that a man as dashing as Bruce Banner was attending the party without a plus one. It was none of his business though, Steve reminds himself quickly.

"I'm glad you're here, Sergeant Barnes. The rest of the guests have been... unwilling to risk a conversation with me," Bruce says.

"I wonder what that's like," Bucky deadpans. "Everyone is so keen to talk to Captain America's dangerously unstable boyfriend. I've been fighting people back all night. Steve here has been ignored by at least three world leaders in their haste to talk to me."

Bruce smiles sympathetically at his fellow brunet and Steve can't help but feel like a third wheel all of a sudden. Even with Sam finally getting his head out of his hands, the conversation suddenly twists and becomes the Bruce-and-Bucky talk.

Originally it had surprised Steve how well the two got on at first. Back before Coulson had lifted Bucky's ban on weapons training the recovering soldier was getting antsy. He was frustrated about the ban because while he understood that he couldn't be trusted, he felt the need to stay at the top of his game. Eventually Steve had taken him to the gym at the Avengers tower and had just left him to it while he went a few rounds on a couple of punching bags. By the time he had had enough and went to find Bucky, the other had made a friend. He found Bucky stretched out on a mat doing a pose Steve didn't know the name of. Bruce had been beside him, offering pointers and gently guiding his arms into the correct position. Bucky had looked relaxed.

Since then they'd gone back once a week and Bucky had continued to practise yoga with Bruce as Steve kept to himself. Occasionally Bucky would join him in whatever he was doing for the session, but Steve was happy to let the two isolated men find something in each other. He knew Bucky needed more than just him.

“I heard Coulson is letting you have your weapons privilege back. Will you be at the firing range from now on or do you think you’ll find time to visit the gym?” Bruce asks with an uncertain smile.

Bucky reaches back to run his hand through his hair, freezes when he realises any touch will ruin the neat style and drops his hand with a sheepish grin. “Thought I could find time for both; if you still want the company that is.”

Steve sees the smile on Bruce’s face and he thinks Bucky’s amazing to get that reaction from the doctor. He’s only aware that he’s got a dopey look on his face when Sam looks at him with raised eyebrows. Wiping the expression, he shakes Bruce’s hand as the other Avenger says his goodbyes and goes in search of Tony.

“I still can’t believe I got Pepper’s age wrong,” laments Sam, turning to look out into the forest of faces, “Why couldn’t I have just chipped in on the gift card you gave her?”

Clapping him on the shoulder and steering him towards the bar, Steve replies, “I only let Buck go halves with me because he’s hopeless at buying presents. It would have never occurred to him that she’d like a weekend at her favourite spa.”

“I resent that, Rogers!” Bucky calls out from behind them, “I seem to recall getting you some great presents.”

Steve laughs as Sam gets settled on a bar stool and signals the staff for a drink.

They spend the next half hour at the bar, though none of them are any drunker for it. While Steve is unable to get drunk thanks to the serum, Bucky is still somewhat capable. As an experiment he had sat down with Sam and Steve one night and drank until their alcohol stock was depleted and he was giggly enough to be deemed tipsy. He knew better than to try that too often though, the sheer amount of alcohol needed for such a task being only a stone’s throw away from alcohol poisoning for his drinking companion. Sam is both envious and amazed by this ability.

Luckily, he isn’t drunk by the time Colonel James Rhodes happens upon them.

“Sam!” he greets, pulling the other man into a hug. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

The pair draw back from their hug and grab each other’s forearms in what is almost a handshake. It’s familiar and friendly and altogether surprising for the two onlookers. Steve shares a confused look with Bucky, who shrugs his shoulders and sips his whiskey.

Sam is halfway through a sentence when he cuts himself off and remembers his friends.

“Steve, you know Rhodey, right?” he says, gesturing to the newcomer.

“Yes, we met on a mission a few months back. Hello Colonel,” Steve says, giving a half wave.

Rhodey inclines his head with a warm smile, clearly remembering. It had only been a short mission and they hadn’t had time to talk much, but Steve is still surprised that they didn’t realise they had a mutual friend in Sam. He would have to ask Sam about it later.

“And as for this stranger; James, meet James.” Sam grins.

For a moment neither man quite seems to know what to say to that and then Rhodey is offering his hand.

“Rhodey, please.”

“Bucky. Nice to meet you,” Bucky replies, taking the hand in his own.

If Rhodey is disappointed not to be shaking the metal hand, he’s hiding it better than half the guests at the party so far have. Someone from the bar appears and slides a drink over to Rhodey before vanishing back into the throng of waiting people.

“Tony tells me you’ve enrolled in a mechanics course for the upcoming semester. He seems pretty excited to finally have someone to talk shop with.”

Like a candle that’s been lit, Bucky’s entire expression shifts from one of polite indifference to the look Steve knows he gets when he’s drawing. The corners of Bucky’s mouth curls up and he launches into the same conversation he’s had with Steve a million times the past week.

“Mechanics and repairs actually. It’s at New York University which is – what? Twenty minutes from our place in Brooklyn?” Steve nods at him, “Yeah so we thought I’d struggle to get in now that the education system has changed and I don’t have the right qualifications, but it turns out being best friends with a national icon has some perks.”

Rhodey laughs at that as though it’s an inside joke he gets all too well.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how’re you paying for it? I thought you turned down the offer to join SHIELD.” Genuine curiosity is mixed in with the brown of Rhodey’s eyes and it’s clear there’s no offence implied behind the words.

In the middle of the room the DJ changes to a new track that has Sam on his feet and pushing his glass into Steve’s broad chest, “Hold onto this, I gotta go to work!”. Steve laughs and cradles the drink as the majority of the guests all dash to the dance floor. He doesn’t recognise the dance they’re doing, nor the song, but seeing people of all ages and social classes shake their hips and jump a quarter turn to the right is something he considers to be almost cultish.

Bucky doesn’t seem to be interested though, ploughing on with his explanation about back pay, inflation rates and an old bank account that he had managed to prove was his. He’s just talking about his recent consultations for SHIELD and the intel he’s given them about HYDRA when Natasha appears. Taking his opportunity, Rhodey says something about visiting the little boy’s room and leaves.

“Hi boys,” Natasha smiles flirtatiously, the way she only does when she wants something.

“Hey Nat,” Steve responds suspiciously.

He leans in and gives her a peck on the cheek, hoping her foundation doesn’t rub off on his lips. It must do, because she bounces onto her toes (an impressive feat in heels) and swipes her thumb over his lower lip. Bucky watches them both with an odd look on his face, but it quickly breaks into a grin when Natasha turns to greet him. Steve can’t help but think she looks like royalty in her dark green dress. The neckline is asymmetric and the whole ensemble boasts a silver trim. With a start Steve realises her dress matches Bruce’s shirt colour and he wonders if that was intentional.

Natasha catches him staring and does a little twirl for his benefit. “Do you like it?”

“It matches Bruce’s shirt.”

The comment earns Steve an eye roll from Bucky but Natasha is still smiling. She does that a lot more these days.

“Clint’s on a mission right now so I asked Banner to be my date for the night. You know how he is with crowds. I thought he’d like a friendly face, but I lost him nearly an hour ago.”

Bucky raises his eyebrows at this. “You lost a single man in a room this size? I trained you better than this, Nat.”

He gets a playful punch in retaliation. “He shook me deliberately and I’m not stupid enough to find a man that’s more comfortable by himself,” she explains. “Anyway, it’s you I’m looking for.”

Finishing his whiskey, Bucky spreads his hands as if to say “Here I am.”

Steve is still stuck on Bucky’s reference to his shared past with Natasha. Of course he knew about the Red Room and the relationship the pair had had when Bucky was mentoring Natasha. It unsettled him a little to know that the two had been together but Bucky had said all that was in the past. Things were different now that he was himself again.

“Come on soldier, urgent Russian matters need attending to,” Natasha instructs, linking her arm through Bucky’s.

She winks at Steve and promises to return Bucky before midnight as she drags him off into the sea of people. Once they’re out of sight, Steve can’t help but feel lonely. He swirls Sam’s drink around inside the glass and debates getting himself a drink. It seems rather pointless.

Just then Rhodey returns and sits down on Sam’s stool.

“Did I miss something?” he asks.

Steve shrugs and notices one of the barkeepers leave a drink at Rhodey’s elbow for the second time that night. Seeing his expression, Rhodey explains that Tony’s people all know his drink without needing to be told. He admits that the effort is a bit overboard, but he doesn’t mind. He sips his drink and the pair lapse into small talk about Tony, the party and their joint mission.

The ice in Sam’s drink has completely melted by the time Rhodey says, “So did you fall for Barnes before the war or is that a more recent development?”

Steve splutters out something that might have been a protest. The certainty in Rhodey’s voice astounds him and renders him mute.

“Don’t try and tell me there’s nothing there. I was Tony Stark’s wingman for years, I know what a guy looks like when he sees someone he likes.” Rhodey crosses his arms and waits.

There’s something relieving in knowing that Rhodey is just perceptive and there’s a chance no one else picked up on Steve’s affections. Still, Steve is cherry red when he sets Sam’s drink down on the bar and scans the area for any familiar faces. This isn’t a conversation he wants overheard.

“I’ve-” he trails off and licks his lips, continuing only when Rhodey prompts him. “I’ve loved Bucky since I was six years old and he saved me from schoolyard bullies. I loved him when he shipped off to England and I loved him when I first saw him again in Washington. But he doesn’t- we never-”

He can’t finish. The chain around his neck – between skin and shirt – is suddenly too cold, too heavy. It weighs down on him, but it’s nothing compared to the invisible weight of pining for Bucky. Opposite him, Rhodey seems startled by Steve’s confession. Good, Steve thinks, because this is the first time he’s verbalised it and it deserves to get a strong reaction.

“You mean the two of you aren’t together? Everything you’ve done for him this past half a year, everything way back when, and you guys aren’t a couple?” Rhodey sounds scandalised.

There doesn’t seem to be a correct response to that so Steve stays quiet. Bucky owes him nothing. Steve was just doing what any friend should do and he expected nothing but friendship in return. The fact that Bucky was back in his life was enough. The fact that he sometimes smiled (smiled for *Steve*) was enough. And maybe along the way his actions had made him love Bucky all the more, but that didn’t mean it was reciprocated.

Rhodey looks like he’s seconds away from calling an intervention when Sam returns, breathless. He says something that might have been a greeting and grabs his drink off the bar, downing in it a couple of mouthfuls. He’s sweating significantly but looks pleased with himself.

“Falcon here will agree with me,” Rhodey begins, “Hey Sam, the Captain and Sergeant Barnes would make a great couple, don’t you think?”

For a second Sam looks at Rhodey as though the other just suggested they learn English.

“They *are* a couple.” he says, signalling for another drink.

Steve doesn’t miss a beat.

“No,” Steve insists. “We’re not.”

“...You’re not?”

“No! What made you think that?”

Rhodey looks from Sam to Steve as if they’re serving a tennis ball between them and he’s got money on the winner. Steve’s deflection is flustered and uncoordinated. Around them no one seems interested with this sudden development and secretly Rhodey thinks they’re missing out.

“Barnes told me!” Sam splutters. “Nearly two weeks ago.”

Steve goes a peculiar shade of red and outright gapes. Sam could be his mirror image. This was too much.

“You,” Rhodey points at Steve, “are going to find Barnes and clear this up. You,” his finger swivels to Sam, “are going to tell me everything you know.”

He promises to cover for Steve in the unlikely event anyone asks where he and Barnes are. Sam tries to promise too but he’s still in that shocked-silent part of confusion.

Steve dives into the crowd, barely registering the people vying for his attention. He ignores film stars, political upshots and someone who may have been Happy. Tunnel vision clouds his sight and dulls his hearing to all but the familiar pitch of Bucky’s voice. He can’t hear or see him though, so Steve climbs the staircase to the upper level.

Stopping halfway up, he turns back and looks down on the crowd from his vantage point. For a moment he wonders if Clint would have a better shot at finding Bucky like this. He pushes aside the thought and notices a game of poker happening at his two o’clock. Sat at the table is Natasha and opposite her, Bucky. The pair are whispering into the ears of strangers but Steve disregards this as he strides back down the stairs three at a time.

He’s at the table in seconds, not even out of breath as he materialises at Bucky’s shoulder.

“извините господи, я думаю, что меня сейчас отзовут.” Bucky’s accent is flawless, giving away the hours he’d spent conversing with Natasha in an effort to keep his Russian fluent.

He flashes a smile at Steve. In that split second of unfiltered sunlight, Steve forgets what he wanted to say.

“This is the ‘urgent Russian matters’?” he questions instead.

Natasha whispers something to her partner then meets Steve’s eyes. “I needed another translator for the game. I’m good, but I’m only one person, Rogers.”

Steve takes that to mean the men at the table didn’t trust her not to cheat. The players eye him sceptically and at least three draw their cards closer to their chest. He doesn’t take offence.

“Are you nearly done? It’s just-”

“Yes please take him; he just lost round for the Foreign Minister,” Natasha says flippantly, waving her hand in a shooing motion.

Looking bashful, Bucky says his goodbyes. “Don’t forget you owe me for this, Tasha.”

She winks at him and goes back to the game, directing her companion’s hand with a glimmer in her eye.

Steve steps back to allow Bucky up from his chair and he leads him across the room and in the direction of the elevator. It’s only when he sees the metal doors that he remembers Bucky’s discomfort and veers to the stairs instead. He can hear the sharp click of Bucky’s dress shoes behind him.

Pushing the door open, Steve hesitates at the top of the stairwell. They’re over 100 floors up, daunting even for a super soldier. Just because Steve was stronger than a Greek god it didn’t mean he didn’t enjoy cheating and taking the elevator some times. The outer walls of the stairwell are sheer glass again, a recurring theme in the Avengers tower. They reflect the lights of a sleepless New York.

“Where’re we going, Steve? Where’s Sam?” Bucky calls.

Steve looks back over his shoulder and realises he’s barely spoken in the last few minutes. There’s a slight look of concern on his best friend’s face and he wonders, does Bucky really think they’re a couple? Even now? He worries his lip.

“Talk to me, Rogers.”

The order in his voice brings Steve up sharp and though Bucky was never his commanding officer he still responds accordingly.

“We’re going to my floor. We need to talk. Sam and Rhody are covering for us,” he adds almost as an afterthought.

Bucky continues asking questions as they descend the next twenty or so flights of stairs to Steve’s floor. He gets no answer from the blond though and eventually falls quiet beside him. Blood is pounding in Steve’s ears – or maybe it’s just the sound of heavy footfalls on stone stairs – and he can’t *think*. He practically sprints the last few steps to the door leading off the landing. Usually anyone wanting to get to Steve’s floor had to use the elevator, but the stairs were there for fire safety regulations and the lock was a straight forward thumbprint scan.

Once the door is open, Steve steps inside, causing the motion sensors turn on the lights, and he holds the door for Bucky, trying to avoid his puzzled eyes as he passes. He thinks about offering to make them both a drink when Bucky turns on him and fixes him with a Look.

There's no stalling. It just comes out.

"Do you think we're a couple? And that we were back- back before all this?"

The words echo in the hallway, bouncing off walls and mirrors and the metal of Bucky's arm. They bounce around in his skull, drowning out the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen and the sharp sounds of his breathing.

Bucky says the only thing he can think to say, "Yes."

Steve seems to deflate, his shoulders sagging. Aborting a step towards the door to the living room, he settles for resting his weight against the wall and just staring at Bucky. His silence feels like a question.

"I don't-" Bucky breaks off. He takes a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing, "I don't remember everything still, Steve. Chances are I've remembered all I ever will, both of my time with HYDRA and with you." He ignores Steve's shudder at the mention of HYDRA. "I don't remember ever calling you mine exactly, but the rest of it fits. I know we were together back in the thirties and I know we can't just pick up where we left off, not when I had so much shit to sort through in my head. But I understand that you knew that. I know that's why you've been rebuffing me. I can handle this though, Steve. We can carry on."

Despite listening to everything Bucky says, Steve can't believe it. Bucky's so sure they were together that for a moment Steve wonders if *he* isn't the amnesiac and he's completely forgotten a life in which he was dating his best friend. It seems ludicrous, but no more so than the reality that Bucky's been under a false impression for the last half a year.

"We weren't, Buck. Trust me, we weren't ever a couple. Why'd you think we were?" his lips are dry but Steve doesn't notice, too fixated on Bucky's torn expression.

Bucky's breath hitches and for a second Steve thinks he's going to cry. Instead, he lunges forward and tugs at Steve's tie.

"Bucky! What the hell?"

His hands are slapped away and Bucky starts on the top buttons of Steve's shirt, stopping only when he spots the chain. Slowly, tenderly, he reaches out and slides his fingers behind it. Holding it up, it catches the light.

"I gave you this. I gave you my momma's wedding ring before I went to war." Unlike the last time Bucky had mentioned the ring, his voice is assured.

Steve stares into his eyes, their noses only inches apart as Bucky keeps his grip on the chain. His pupils are blown wide after the shock of Bucky lunging at him and if he were still asthmatic he may have had a hard time breathing.

"You gave it to me to pawn, Buck. Said if I ever needed the money to pay rent I had to sell it to old man Jones down the street."

He wishes he were lying.

Bucky shakes his head and steps away, releasing the ring. A pained look flits over his features. It's obvious to Steve that he didn't have that part of the memory. His metal hand combs through his hair, cutting through the styling gel and pushing the hair tie out and onto the floor.

"No, we shared a bed, Steve. Food, clothes, baths! I stayed with you when we thought you were dying. I remember how I *felt* when you nearly did. You held my hand even when the Priest came to give you last rites and you wouldn't let go." He's pulling at his hair now, face twisting in disbelief.

Sliding down the wall, Steve crumples on the floor. He wants to say, "Yeah how silly of me, of course we were together!" but Bucky deserves the truth: He deserves explanations for the memories that contort and spiral in his head. Steve finds his palms pressed against his forehead, his elbows propped up by his knees.

"You were my best friend. You *are* my best friend. We shared a bed in winter because I got pneumonia one year and you wouldn't risk it again. We were too poor not to share everything else."

Bucky's eyes flick down to the right and he gets visibly angry. His hands curl into fists – the metal one scraping slightly as it does – and he starts pacing. Steve can't remember seeing him like this before. Was he reacting like this because the floor had been pulled from under him and once again his grasp on his memories was proven to be shaky? Six months is a long time to live under a false impression and for someone of Bucky's past it could have untold repercussions.

In the quiet of the hallway Steve can hear Bucky's teeth grinding. He's caught him doing this a few times back in the war. It was something he did only when he was under a lot of stress and was trying to think.

"I kissed you!" he blurts out, "a lot!"

But Steve has an answer for this too.

"Practise," he squeaks.

Bucky stops his pacing and fixes Steve with an incredulous look. His body language says he doesn't believe him. Steve wants to bolt, wants to beg for forgiveness.

"You said I should learn for when I finally got a dame of my own. Said it didn't mean anything because it was practise and you kissed half the gals in Brooklyn back then."

"If you really expect me to believe that, Rogers-" Bucky cries.

"I didn't!" His whole face is burning. Steve's eyes are locked on the floorboards and he can't will himself to look up. "I didn't want to believe it," he carries on in a hushed tone, "I used to pretend it was real, like it meant something. But then you'd pull back and clap me on the shoulder and say you'd find a dame for me yet. Damn near broke my heart each time, Buck."

He confesses all of this to a mark on the floorboard (mud, perhaps). Iron lungs or not, it's hard to get enough air. Above him, Bucky hasn't resumed his pacing. If Steve couldn't see his feet out of his peripheral vision he would think Bucky had left.

Bucky seems to process this and Steve is more than happy to keep quiet and let him. After a few minutes he thinks it's safe to look up. The once emotionless face of the Winter Solider has been replaced by a man who looks worn thin. Bucky's eyes betray his sadness at Steve's last comment but his mouth is still set in an angry frown. His brow knots together when Steve risks eye contact.

“You’re telling me you were sweet on me but nothing ever came of it? The bravest man I ever knew was too chicken to-” he cuts himself off as he works into an angry rant. Bucky throws his hands up and says, “Always an excuse for everything, Rogers. The kissing was practise, the ring meant nothing and apparently every fella in Brooklyn was bathing with his buddy to save money. What’s next, you gonna tell me that when you told me ya loved me I took it to mean just as brothers?”

Steve freezes. “I never said that.”

“Sure ya did. That night after we buried your momma. We were curled up in bed and you said it, clear as day.” Bucky’s nostrils flare but his fists unclench as he mentions Sarah Rogers.

“I thought you were asleep,” the confession comes out as a mortified whisper.

“...What?”

Steve pushes himself back onto his feet, using the wall for support. Bucky’s hand twitches as if to help but he refrains.

“I only said it ‘cause I thought you couldn’t hear me, Buck. Christ,” Steve frowns, “We weren’t together, Bucky. Trust me. That doesn’t mean I didn’t *want* us to be. We just... never got to have this talk I guess.” He trails off.

Finally, *finally*, Bucky believes him. His posture slacks and he casts his eyes down the hall as if the right thing to say is at the other end.

“We’re having it now,” he states.

“Buck-”

Bucky waves his hand and finds Steve’s mute button. He scrutinises Steve so intently that Steve feels himself shrinking under the gaze. He still can’t breathe properly but it’s okay. He feels lighter than he has in years.

Under the harsh glare of the hallway lights, Bucky’s hand reaches out and catches hold of Steve’s. It seems like a test, one that he knows he’s passed when Steve smiles at him.

“I loved you back then, even if you didn’t know. Love you now too - once I began to remember. What about you? You still sweet on me, Rogers?” Bucky sounds almost coy.

Steve can’t help the giddy laugh that bubbles up and spills out of his well-bitten lips. He strokes his thumb over Bucky’s knuckles and feels a blush creeping up on him.

“You could say that. Kept your ring, didn’t I?” he quips.

“Yeah, you did. We’re going about this all backwards though; I haven’t even given you a real kiss yet.”

Until this moment Steve Rogers would swear up and down that Bucky Barnes never got nervous when he was flirting. However now he had proof to the contrary in the way Bucky met his smile with an honest yet uncertain one of his own.

Steve forgets the past. He steps forward, takes hold of Bucky’s chin and feels the unfamiliar sensation of stubble rough on his fingers. Before he closes the distance he says:

“Good thing I had practise.”

Bucky kisses like Steve knew he would. Rough lips and a bump of the nose. Air tickles Steve’s face as Bucky exhales through his nose slowly. His hands cup Steve’s jaw and he pulls them even closer. It’s comforting. It’s exactly how Bucky remembers.

When they pull apart they’re barely breathless. They had so much catching up to do and there was no reason to rush anything. Steve wanted to enjoy whatever Bucky would give him.

“Hey Stevie,” Bucky says, his voice a breath of air between them.

“Hey Buck,” Steve answers, equally quiet.

“Why’ve you been letting me call you ‘doll’ if we weren’t a couple? You’re a weird one, Rogers.”

There’s no good answer for that, so Steve just laughs and tilts his face up to kiss Bucky’s forehead. When he looks back at Bucky’s face he sees the man he’s loved for nearly a hundred years. He thinks Bucky sees the same.

Chapter End Notes

Bucky says “извините господа, я думаю, что меня сейчас отзовут.” to the men at his table which (and we can thank RussianWitch for correcting me on this) translates to: “Forgive me, gentlemen. I think I’m about to be called away”

The cult dance is the macarena and the memory of a park that Bucky had earlier was actually a drawing Steve had done.

Once again, thank you all for reading. Look out for more of this sappy couple on my account soon!

Come yell about these boys with me on my tumblr: actualkatebishop.tumblr.com

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